

# On Terms

## Radical Behaviorism: A Nonradical Recommendation

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As we begin to know more about the effects of verbal behavior in influencing and controlling the behavior of others, we might also usefully re-examine some of the terminology that has served us well in the past, but that may now be somewhat counter-productive in terms of the positive impact we wish our science to have on society at large. *Radical behaviorism* as defined by Skinner in *About Behaviorism* is one such term (Skinner, 1974).

The term *radical behaviorism* occupies a central position in the writings of Skinner and in the history of behaviorism. Skinner has referred to himself as a *radical behaviorist* and to *radical behaviorism* as the philosophy of the science of behavior (Skinner, 1974, 1979). More generally, "*radical behaviorism* is the established formal designation for B. F. Skinner's philosophy of the science of behavior" (Schneider & Morris, 1987, p. 36).

When *radical behaviorism* was originally introduced in the 1920s by Calkins (1921) to designate the behaviorism of Watson, the word "radical" served a useful descriptive purpose in that Watson's position was, indeed, quite radical, since it was a thoroughgoing departure from the established psychology of the 1920s. The term has since undergone considerable evolution. In Skinner's first published use of the term (Skinner, 1945), he made the useful distinction between *radical behaviorism* and *methodological be-*

*haviorism*. He later refined the term and used it to designate his own position (Skinner, 1974). *Radical behaviorism*, has since been used increasingly to refer to the philosophy of the science of the experimental analysis of behavior. The term continues to be used in behavioral publications to define the uniqueness of the behavior-analytic view of science (Hayes & Brownstein, 1986; Lee, 1987).

Despite the positive and productive role the term *radical behaviorism* has played in our science, cogent reasons exist for considering a change in terminology. Both the meaning of the word "radical" and the well known connotations associated with it are such that the word in almost any context tends to provoke negative reactions in readers or listeners. Even in the 1920s and 1930s, the word "radical" as used in connection with behaviorism had a decidedly negative connotation, as the following quote illustrates.

There have come down wolf-like on the psychological fold the already mentioned behaviorists, the most extreme of these would deny to man the power of observing his own consciousness *at all*; and on the radical ground that, in truth, no such consciousness is known to exist! (Spearman, 1937, p. 79).

Although in a formal or scientific sense, some of the negative connotations associated with the term *radical behaviorism* have moderated somewhat over the years, they continue to exist (Schneider & Morris, 1987).

Moreover, the term *radical behaviorism* continues to cause confusion, even among behaviorists. Lee (1987) noted confusion in the use of the term *radical behaviorism* by contributors to a recently published book on behavior analysis, and then phrased the question succinctly.

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We might clarify this relationship [i.e. between *radical behaviorism* and behavior analysis] if we could abandon the term *radical behaviorism*. It misleads, it alienates, and it blocks communication. Who wants to be labelled a behaviorist these days and particularly a radical one? (p. 96)

If behaviorists are confused and alienated by the term, we can expect other professionals and the general public to have a similar if not more extreme negative reaction to it.

Since we want our message to be heard and received in a positive manner by society, we might avoid using terminology that will provoke a negative reaction. In a recent keynote address at the Florida Association for Behavior Analysis, Aubrey Daniels (1987) observed that we are often our own worst enemy. We frequently present our case in a way that alienates the public and other professions. Since behaviorism has received so much negative publicity over the years, it would behoove us to begin to influence our readers in a positive direction by the use of terminology that produces a more favorable response.

Modification of the term *radical behaviorism* would appear to be one step in the right direction. While it would not be prudent to discard a term that has played such a central role in the development of our science, it is entirely possible to replace the word "radical" with a more positive and descriptive word, while at the same time retaining the basic meaning of the term.

Since Skinner's objective was to establish a science of behavior from the beginning (Skinner, 1979, p. 342), and since *radical behaviorism* is the established formal designation of B. F. Skinner's philosophy of science (Moore, 1981; Schneider & Morris, 1987), Skinner's position is then naturally equated with the science of behaviorism or *scientific behaviorism*.

I recommend we use the term *scientific behaviorism* to replace the term *radical behaviorism* except in those instances in which the term *radical behaviorism* is operationally needed to reference Skinner's writings or the related writing of others. It is recommended that *scientific behaviorism* be substituted for *radical behav-*

*iorism* as the designation for the philosophy of the science of behavior, and that whenever behaviorists use the term *scientific behaviorism* it be understood that the term is operationally equivalent to *radical behaviorism*.

Several advantages accrue to replacing the term *radical behaviorism* with the term *scientific behaviorism*. First, the negative connotations associated with the word "radical" are eliminated. Second, we replace "radical" with a word that has, in most circles, very positive connotations. Third, the new term is descriptive in that *scientific behaviorism* is closely aligned with the philosophy of the natural sciences. Fourth, nothing is lost historically, since the term has evolved both in meaning and usage since it was originally introduced in 1921. This recommended change represents a natural evolution shaped by the contingencies of social reinforcement. Last, but no means least, this change allows us to designate Skinner as the father of *scientific behaviorism*, a designation which further clarifies his critical historical position in the establishment of the science of behavior.

Although seemingly small in nature, this change may produce an overall significant improvement in the way our science is perceived by other professionals, by society and perhaps even by ourselves. This change represents one small step for behavior analysts, but one giant step for behavior analysis.

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